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ABSTRACT

Bracketing is defined as a procedure whereby individual decisionmaking team members sharpen their perceptions of organizational need prior to administrative action. Like the Delphi technique, the procedure eliminates major detriments of group activity planning and includes sequential interrogations and feedback procedures. Unlike the Delphi technique, respondents are not given descriptive indexes of group thinking prior to the definition of team-expressed organizational need. A review is given of how bracketing was used to advantage in defining administrative needs, priorities, and performance objectives for the Birmingham, Michigan, Public Schools. (Author)

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# THE BRACKETING TECHNIQUE: A METHOD FOR DEFINING ADMINISTRATIVE NEEDS AND PRIORITIES.

A PAPER PRESENTED TO THE
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# ABSTRACT


TITLE

The Bracketing Technique,

A Method For Defining Administrative Needs And Priorities

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CONTENT

Bracketing is defined as a process of incremental improvement of a statement in a variety of activities, including sequential interrogation and feedback. In Bracketing, members of a group individually revise statements in order to clarify their meaning. Successive revisions identify differences and similarities of opinion, and assist in reaching consensus.

Unlike the Delphi technique, in the Bracketing process respondents are not given descriptive indices of group thinking prior to the definition of team-expressed organizational need. This paper defines Bracketing in the context of its development and reviews how it was used to advantage in defining administrative needs and priorities in the Birmingham, Michigan, Public Schools.

# THE PAPER

## INTRODUCTION

> When Europa was carried away by the bull, her father sent her brothers to search for her, bidding them not to return until they had found her. One of them, Cadmus, instead of looking vaguely here and there went very sensibly to Delphi....(6)

Educational researchers have also often "gone to Delphi" to separate the desirable from the bull. They have used Delphi to forecast important long-range developments (1), to define pressing local needs (4), and to predict major educational trends (5). Current literature heralds Delphi as "a decision-maker's dream" (9) and a viable alternative to standard methods of obtaining consensus (8).

But, researchers are also finding that Delphi has its limitations. Action research in the public school system of Birmingham, Michigan, has produced an alternative which may be used in place of or in conjunction with the Delphi Method. It is called Bracketing. Educational administrators in Birmingham regard it as superior to traditional Delphi as well as superior to the old standbys of the inside-outside expert decision and of the round-table consensus. They have used it successfully for over a year to define administrative needs, district priorities, and individual performance objectives.

The technique of Bracketing is presented in this paper in the context of its development. Part One includes a brief discussion of how the technique developed. Part Two presents an overview of what the technique produced.

## PART ONE

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE TECHNIQUE

The methodological options available to the school system naturally depend upon the task at hand. In Birmingham, the district was faced with defining the most pressing administrative problems confronting the schools through 1974-75 and the best alternatives to solving them over a two-year time period. The initial options considered in developing these organizational priorities were (a) inside-outside expert decision, (b) round-table consensus through discussion, and (c) Delphi. Faced with the district's pressing need for defining administrative priorities and maintaining an objective-based instructional program, the merits and detriments of each of the three alternatives were considered by the Superintendent.

The inside-outside expert decision approach was termed not acceptable. The Superintendent was not willing to take the chance of the limited perspective of a few determining the future of many. He felt that one or more experts either within or outside the school system would not be able to meet the desired deadlines, impartially hear concerns from all factions within the district, and refine such responses into comprehensive plans of corrective action.

Round-table consensus by committee was discarded because it was decided that this technique would only enforce bandwagon thinking and unduly narrow the focus of the task at hand.

Delphi appeared to be a potentially productive tool. It had been defined in the literature as a method that minimized the disadvantages of both the expert and the group decision approaches (9). It was

promoted by its originator as the only way to "make effective use of informed intuitive judgements" (7), and it had been recommended as an alternative to community deliberations where forensic abilities prevail (10). Delphi seemed, indeed, to be a potentially powerful research tool that Birmingham could use to secure expert convergent opinions. It was tight and clean, and it effectively replaced the expert and the committee with individual interrogation interspersed with input and feedback.

But, on close inspection, the Birmingham staff decided that Delphi was not conducive to either the personalities of the Board Trustees and administrators, or the way the Board and Administrative team preferred to operate. Delphi seemed to rely too heavily on individual expertise (2), and often postponed beneficial dialog between the Board and Administrators until after a third or fourth opinionnaire review. The district felt that this latter constraint was especially detrimental to Birmingham's program. Without an initial sharpening of focus cooperatively, both groups of the school system felt that Delphi would spin wheels rather than produce quick and meaningful consensus. With these considerations in mind the system developed its own technique which it called Bracketing.

The Bracketing Technique may be defined as a process of incremental improvement of a statement in a variety of activities, including sequential interrogation and feedback. In bracketing, members of a group individually revise statements in order to clarify their meaning. Successive revisions identify differences and similarities of opinion, and assist in reaching consensus.

Like Delphi, the procedure eliminates the major detriments of group dynamics and includes sequential interrogation and feedback procedures.

Unlike Delphi, Bracketing concentrates on individual clarification of ideas prior to initial group input. In the Bracketing process respondents define what they feel are pressing organizational needs but are not given descriptive indices of group thinking prior to the collation of all other team-expressed organizational needs. A summary of the difference between Delphi and Bracketing is presented in Table 1.

The way in which a respondent is directed to his individual and precise expression of need resembles the "Bracketing" of a military field perimeter. As an administrative team member looks on, the Board trustee "shoots" into a field of possible district needs. Often, this first shot is worded as "What do you think are the primary problems facing the school district?" Rarely is the target (the most precise need statement by the trustee) "hit" in this first shot. After continued interviewing, the trustee usually expresses his opinions in more precise need statements associated with his original choice. These are analogous to additional shots into the field which further delimit the target area. The administrator acts as range finder to the "target" of trustee concern. Mentally, he pictures the perimeters of the field closing or expanding around the real but unknown trustee concern or concerns.

Further interrogation produces one or more vital priorities that the trustee feels are important. In effect, verbal shots are fired into the field until the trustee and the administrator are satisfied that the target has been hit and described accurately. The actual steps of the Bracketing Technique are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF DELPHI-BRACKETING DIFFERENCES

| | | Delphi | Bracketing |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Expertise level | High | Low |
| 2. | Time orientation | Future | Present |
| 3. | Communication mode | Written | Oral and written |
| 4. | Active participants | Decision-makers as individuals | Decision-makers as teams |
| 5. | Purpose | To forecast trends through group-imposed interrogation | To determine needs and priorities through self-imposed interrogation |
| 6. | Process | Sequential interrogation steps based upon a central position from the outside | Sequential interrogation steps based upon self-reflection from the inside |
| 7. | Product | Group consensus | Group consensus |
| 8. | Consensus achieved | Through striving for a narrowing group position | Through striving for idea refinement and self-expression prior to the refinement of a group position |
| 9. | Assumptions | Consensus is best reached when individuals are forced to move to a prespecified central position | Consensus is best reached when individuals refine their position without pressure to adopt a pre-specified central position |

TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF THE BRACKETING TECHNIQUE

| Steps | Activities | Participant(s) |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Preliminary in-depth interview | Administrators and Trustees |
| 2 | Initial statement writing, listing sorting, and clustering of major concerns | Administrator |
| 3 | Independent editing of clustered concern statements | Trustees |
| 4 | Restatement, re-listing, re-sorting and re-clustering into major priority statements to be used for Step 5 prioritizing activities | Administrator |
| 5 | Prioritizing of major priority statements by all trustees and administrative staff individually | All trustees and administrators of the district |
| 6 | Group discussion of ranked priorities and timelines in a workshop setting | Trustees and administrators in two separate groups, one trustee group and one administrator group |
| 7 | Final review of priorities and timelines by study groups | One trustee and 6 administrators in each of 7 groups |
| 8 | Final Board adoption of district priorities | All trustees with administrative support |

## OUTCOMES OF THE PROCESS

After using the Bracketing process described in Table 2, the majority of decision-makers in Birmingham have concluded that it is a useful addition to the consensus forecasting tools of the researcher. It has the potential to define organization priorities without eliminating the essential advantage of knowing why people choose such alternatives. It also has been beneficial in reassuring respondents that they can cooperatively establish a rationale to attack a common problem.

When used properly, Bracketing can quickly coalesce the thinking of individuals with different backgrounds and roles within the school system. It may easily be used as a formative evaluation tool. It may also be used to define basic activity timeline constraints and terminal product goals needed for the evaluation of administrative performance. It is a simple technique and appears to be easily used with minimum participant in-service preparation.

In Birmingham, the process produced a set of organizational priorities for 1974-75. From these priorities emerged a two-year administrative work plan. The priorities developed through Bracketing have successfully concentrated the energies of the trustees and administrators into a unified focus. Everyone now knows what is to be done on what schedule, and what results can be expected.

In all, five priorities were developed through the Bracketing process. They are listed in Appendix A. Perhaps the one most interesting to educational researchers concerns the priority of program evaluation. This priority has been reproduced in Appendix B.

In conclusion, administrators in the Birmingham Public Schools believe that the Bracketing process is one worth considering if a needs assessment is in your school system's future. Its primary attributes are: (1) that it promotes divergent thinking before difficult consensus decisions have to be made; (2) that it insures key decision-maker involvement through formative evaluation activities; and (3) that it provides all participants with a self-defined foundation with which they are most comfortable before being asked to either hold their opinion or gravitate toward a median opinion of a group.

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# APPENDIX A

# DISTRICT PRIORITIES

Birmingham Public Schools

Birmingham, Michigan

March, 1974

Prepared by the Administrative Staff
of the Birmingham Schools

## MAJOR PRIORITIES*

EVALUATING STAFF PERFORMANCE---To develop and implement an evaluation system for the teaching, administrative, clerical, maintenance, and custodial staff.

EVALUATING PROGRAMS---To develop and initiate a comprehensive program to evaluate systematically the performance of the school district's programs.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT---To create a system to prioritize expenditures to carry out programs which are consistent with the goals, objectives, and priorities of the school district.

PLANNING FOR FACILITIES AND PROGRAMS---To develop a short-term and a comprehensive long-range plan for the Birmingham Public Schools which reviews the anticipated needs of the school district, the physical facilities, and the current program in relation to one another.

IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE AND STAFF PERFORMANCE---To improve teacher performance in the area of humanizing and individualizing instruction and in creating the proper learning climate conducive to the development of student interests and learning.

*These administrative priorities were adopted by the Board of Education on December 5, 1972. Specific implementation activities to support these priorities have been developed by the staff.

## APPENDIX B

### EVALUATING PROGRAMS PRIORITY

To develop and initiate a comprehensive program to evaluate systematically the performance of the school district's programs.

Adequate evaluation is an essential aspect of the school district's activities. This includes the evaluation of the programs now in existence as well as building an evaluation component into any new activities being undertaken. Evaluation is defined as the process of delineating, obtaining, and providing useful information for judging and recommending alternative approaches to achieving organizational goals.

## OBJECTIVES

The major objectives inherent in the goal statement:

> "To develop and initiate a comprehensive program to evaluate systematically the performance of the school district's programs" shall be:

1. By October, 1973, the Evaluation Committee of the Birmingham Public schools will produce an accurate program catalog and practical recommendations identifying those district programs to be evaluated during the 1973-74 school year.

   Evidence of catalog accuracy will be demonstrated by building principal and program manager acceptance of their individual catalog entries. Proof of accuracy will be based upon the correlation of catalog entries with the latest program changes sent by the principals and program managers to the Office of Evaluation.

   Evidence of recommendation practicality will be demonstrated by a majority supportive vote of Curriculum and Administrative Council membership. Each council will vote on the motion to support each Evaluation Committee recommendation.

2. By October, 1973, the Evaluation Committee will design and implement a practical program development plan, as evidenced by a majority vote of confidence of Admininstrative and Curriculum Council membership.

3. By November, 1973, the Evaluation Committee will secure from Administrative and Curriculum Council members, and the Superintendent, a listing of programs in need of level 3 performance objective specification.

4. By March, 1974, selected program staff (or program committee members) whose programs have been defined by Curriculum or Administrative Council as in need of level 3 performance objective specification will be provided with appropriate in-service, as evidenced by positive participant judgements of in-service usefulness and the production of the level 3 objectives specific to each program.

5. By March, 1974, the Evaluation Committee will design a practical program evaluation model for the district, as evidenced by a majority vote of confidence of Administrative and Curriculum Council membership.

6. By September, 1975, all new district programs will follow the program evaluation plan in development and implementation, as evidenced by individual program proposal documentation.

## ACTIVITY TIMELINE

| Activity | Responsibility | Completion Date |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Definition of Program Development Plan | | |
| A. Tentative plan authored | Director Evaluation | 4/73 |
| B. Plan reviewed | Evaluation Committee and Superintendent | 5/73 |
| C. Revision and authorship of plan completed | Director of Evaluation | 5/73 |
| D. Progress report to Board | Superintendent | 5/73 |
| 2. Definition of Existing District Programs | | |
| A. Survey of existing instructional programs | Evaluation Committee | 5/73 |
| B. Review of instructional program survey results | Evaluation Committee and Superintendent | 7/73 |
| C. Survey of existing supportive service programs | Evaluation Committee | 7/73 |
| D. Review of supportive service program survey results | Evaluation Committee and Superintendent | 8/73 |
| E. Survey of administrative practices (e.g. facilities acquisition and construction, food services, etc.) | Director of Evaluation | 8/73 |
| F. Review of administrative practices survey results | Director Evaluation and Superintendent | 8/73 |
| G. Program catalog authored | Evaluation Committee | 9/73 |
| H. Program catalog reviewed (re: state and local goals, and district priorities) | Ad Council Curriculum Council and Evaluation Committee | 10/73 |
| I. Specific programs to be evaluated identified | Ad Council Curriculum Council and Evaluation Committee | 10/73 |
| J. Progress report to Board of Education presented | Superintendent | 10/73 |

| Activity | Responsibility | Completion Date |
|---|---|---|
| 3. Definition of Additional Programs | | |
| A. Survey of Ad Council and Curriculum Council membership | Director of Evaluation | 10/73 |
| B. Feasibility of pilot projects determined | Evaluation Committee and Superintendent | 11/73 |
| 4. Definition of In-service for Staff | | |
| A. Proposal-writing skills session for on-going and pilot project representatives conducted | Director of Evaluation | 11/73 |
| B. Evaluation skills session for on-going and pilot project representatives conducted | Director of Evaluation | 12/73 |
| 5. Implementation of "Teaching-Learning" Accountability Model | | |
| A. Design of tentative accountability model completed | Director of Evaluation | 1/74 |
| B. Review of model completed | Evaluation Committee | 2/74 |
| C. Authorship of formal model, submission of model to Supt. | Director of Evaluation | 3/74 |
| D. Progress report to Board of Education presented | Superintendent | 3/74 |
| E. Dissemination of information throughout district begun | Director of Evaluation | 4/74 |
| F. Test of accountability model begun | Director of Evaluation & Staff | 1974-75 school year |

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